

THE SPOILERS

By Rex E. Beach

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This story of "the hunger for gold digged out of the hills, and the blinding hunger of man for woman and for woman's love," being a vivid picture of the Klondike before the reign of law.

(Continued from last Sunday)

When he put his proposition the Bronco Kid dropped his eyes as though debating. The girl saw that he studied the cards in his box intently and that his fingers caressed the top one over so softly during the instant the eyes of the rest were on Glenister. The dealer looked up at last, and Cherry saw the gleam of triumph in his eye. He could not resist it from her, though his answering words were hesitating. She knew by the look that Glenister was a pauper.

"Come on," insisted Roy hoarsely; "turn the cards."

"You're out!"

The girl felt that she was fainting. She wanted to scream. The triumph of this moment stifled her—or was it triumph, after all? She heard the breath of the little man behind her, rattling as though he were being throttled and saw the look of a shaking hand to his chin, then wet his parched lips. She saw the man she had helped to ruin bend forward, his lean face strained and hard, an odd look of pain and weariness in his eyes. She never forgot that look.

The crowd was frozen in various attitudes of eagerness, although it had not yet recovered from the suspense of the last great wager. It knew the odds and what it meant. Here lay half of it, hidden beneath a tawdry square of pasteboard. With maddening deliberation the Kid dealt the top card. Beneath it was the tray of snakes. Glenister said no word nor made a move. Some one coughed, and a snail-like glances retracted their way. He hesitated purposefully and leered at the girl, then the three spots disappeared and beneath it lay the ace as the king had lain on that other wager. It spelled utter ruin to Glenister. He raised his eyes blindly, and then the deathlike silence of the room was shattered by a sudden crash. Cherry Malotte had closed her check rack violently, at the same instant crying shrill and clear:

"That bet is off! The cases are wrong!"

Glenister half rose, overturning his chair; the Kid lunged forward across the table, and his wonderful hands, tense and talon-like, thrust themselves forward as though reaching for the riches she had snatched away. They worked and writhed and trembled as though in dumb fury, the nails sinking into the oilcloth table cover. His face grew livid and cruel, while his eyes blazed at her till she shrank from him as though he were a snake. She tried to speak, but choked. Then the dealer came to himself and cried harshly through his teeth one word:

"Christ!"

He raised his fist and struck the table so violently that chips and coppers leaped and rolled, and Cherry closed her eyes to lose sight of his awful grimace. Glenister looked down on him and said:

"I think I understand, but the money was yours anyhow, so I don't mind." His meaning was plain. The Kid suddenly jerked open the drawer before him, but Glenister clinched his right hand and leaned forward. The miner could have killed him with a blow, for the gambler was seated and at his mercy. The Kid checked himself, while his face began to twitch as though the nerves underlying it had broken bonds and were dancing in a wild, ungovernable orgy.

"You have taught me a lesson," was all that Glenister said, and with that he pushed through the crowd and out into the cool night air. Overhead the arctic stars winked at him, and the sea smells struck him clean and fresh. As he went homeward he heard the distant full-throated plaint of a wolf dog. It held the mystery and sadness of the north. He paused and, baring his thick, matted head, stood for a long time gathering himself together. Standing so, he made certain covenants with himself and vowed solemnly never to touch another card.

At the same moment Cherry Malotte came hurrying to her cottage door, fleeing as though from pursuit or from some hateful, haunted spot. She paused before entering and flung her arms outward into the dark in a wide gesture of despair.

"Why did I do it? Oh, why did I do it? I can't understand myself."

CHAPTER XIV.

"My dear Helen, don't you realize that with my official position carries with it a certain social obligation which it is our duty to discharge?"

"I suppose so, Uncle Arthur; but I would much rather stay at home."

"Tut, tut! Go and have a good time."

"Dancing doesn't appeal to me any more. I left that sort of thing back home. Now, if you would only come along—"

"No! I'm too busy. I must work to-night, and I'm not in a mood for such things, anyhow."

"You're not well," his niece said. "I have noticed it for weeks. Is it hard work or are you truly ill? You're nervous; you don't eat; you're getting positively gaunt. Why, you're looking like an old maid!"

She rose from her seat at the breakfast table and went to him, something like

silvered head with affection.

He took her cool hand and pressed it to his cheek, while the worry that haunted him habitually of late gave way to a smile.

"It's work, little one—hard and thankless work, that's it. This country is intended for young men, and I'm too far along." His eyes grew grave again, and he squeezed her fingers nervously as though at the thought. "It's a terrible country this. I—I wish we had never seen it."

"Don't say that," Helen cried spiritedly. "Why, it's glorious. Think of the honor. You're a United States judge and the first one to come here. You're making history; you're building a state; people will read about you."

She stooped and kissed him, but he seemed to flinch beneath her caress. "Of course I'll go if you think I'd better," she said, "though I'm not fond of Alaskan society. Some of the women are nice, but the others—"

She shrugged her delicate shoulders. "They talk scandal all the time. One would think that a great, clean, fresh, vigorous country like this would broaden the women as it broadens the men—but it doesn't."

"I'll tell McNamara to call for you at 9 o'clock," said the judge as he arose. So, later in the day, she prepared her long unused finery to such good purpose that when her escort called for her that evening he believed her the loveliest of women.

When she first arrived at the hotel he regarded her with a fresh access of pride, for the function proved to bear little resemblance to a mining camp party. The women were handsome gowns, and every man was in evening dress. The wide hall ran the length of the hotel and was flanked with boxes, while its floor was like polished glass and its walls effectively decorated.

"Oh, how lovely!" exclaimed Helen as she first caught sight of it. "It's just like home."

"I've seen quick rising cities before," he said, "but nothing like this. Still, if these northerners can build a railroad in a month and a city in a summer why shouldn't they have symphony orchestras and Louis Quinze ballrooms?"

"I know you're a splendid dancer," she said. "You shall be my judge and jury. I'll sign this card as often as I can without the certainty of violence at the hands of these young men, and the rest of the time I'll smoke in the lobby. I don't care to dance with any one but you."

After the first waltz he left her surrounded by partners and made his way out of the ballroom. This was his first relaxation since landing in the north. It was well not to become a dull boy, he mused, and as he chewed his cigar he pictured, with an odd thrill, quite unusual with him, that slender, gray-eyed girl, with her coiled mass of hair, her ivory shoulders and merry smile. He saw her float past to the measure of a two-step and caught himself resenting the thought of another man's enjoyment of the girl's charms even for an instant.

"Hold on, Alec," he muttered. "You're too old a bird to lose your head." However, he was waiting for her before the time for their next dance. She seemed to have lost a pair of her gayety.

"What's the matter? Aren't you enjoying yourself?"

"Oh, yes," she returned brightly. "I'm having a delightful time."

When he came for his third dance she was more distrustful than ever. As he led her to a seat they passed a group of women, among whom were Mrs. Champlain and others whom he knew to be wives of men prominent in the town. He had seen some of them at tea in Judge Stillman's house and therefore was astonished when they returned his greeting, but ignored Helen. She shrank slightly, and he realized that there was something wrong. He could not guess what. Affairs of men he could cope with, but the subtleties of women were out of his realm.

"What are those people? Have they offended you?"

"I don't know what it is. I have spoken to them, but they cut me."

"Cut you?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," her voice trembled, but she held her head high. "It seems as though all the women in Nome were here and in league to ignore me. It dazes me. I do not understand."

"Has anybody said anything to you?" he inquired fiercely. "Any man, I mean?"

"No, no! The men are kind. It's the women."

"Come, we'll go home."

"Indeed, we will not," she said proudly. "I shall stay and face it out. I have done nothing to run away from, and I intend to find out what is the matter."

When he had surrendered her, at the beginning of the next dance, McNamara sought for some acquaintance whom he might question. Most of the men in Nome either hated or feared him, but he espied one that he thought suited his purpose and led him into a corner.

"I want you to answer a question. No beating about the bush. Understand? I'm blunt, and I want you to be."

"All right."

"Your wife has been entertained at Miss Chester's house. I've seen her there. Tonight she refuses to speak to the girl. She cut her dead, and I want to know what it's about."

"How should I know?"

"If you don't know, I'll ask you to find out."



"That bet is off! The cases are wrong!"

The other shook his head amusedly, at which McNamara fared up.

"I say you will, and you'll make your wife apologize before she leaves this hall, too, or you'll answer to me, man to man. I won't stand to have a girl like Miss Chester cold decked by a bunch of mining camp swells, and that goes as it lies." In his excitement McNamara reverted to his western idiom.

The other did not reply at once, for it is embarrassing to deal with a person who disregards the conventions utterly, and at the same time has the inclination and force to compel obedience. The boss' reputation had gone abroad.

"Well, er—I know about it in a general way, but of course I don't go much on such things. You'd better let it drop."

"Go on."

"There has been a lot of talk among the ladies about—well, er—the fact is, it's that young Glenister. Mrs. Champlain had the next statement to them—er—him—I should say—on the way up from the States, and she saw things. Now, as far as I'm concerned, a girl can do as she pleases, but Mrs. Champlain has her own ideas of propriety. From what my wife could learn, there's some truth in the story, too, so you can't blame her."

With a word McNamara could have explained the gossip and made this man put his wife right, forcing through her an elucidation of the silly affair such as a wife would spare Helen's feelings and cover the busy tongued masques with confusion. Yet he hesitated. It is a wise skipper who trims his sails to every breeze. He thanked his informant and left him. Entering the lobby, he saw the girl hurrying toward him.

"Take me away, quick! I want to go home."

"You've changed your mind?"

"Yes, let me go," she panted, and when they were outside she walked so rapidly that he had difficulty in keeping pace with her. She was silent, and he knew better than to question, but when they arrived at her house he entered, took off his overcoat and turned up the light in the tiny parlor. She flung her wraps over a chair, storming back and forth like a little fury. Her eyes were starry with tears of anger, her face was flushed, her hands worked nervously. He leaned against the mantel, watching her through his cigar smoke.

"You needn't tell me," he said at length. "I know all about it."

"I am glad you do. I never could repeat what they said. Oh, it was brutal!"

"Her voice caught, and she bit her lip. "What made me ask them? Why didn't I keep still? After you left I went to those women and faced them. Oh, but they were brutal! Yet, why should I care?" She stamped her slippers foot.

"I shall have to kill that man some day," he said, flicking his cigar ashes into the grate.

"What man?" She stood still and looked at him.

"Glenister, of course. If I had thought the story would ever reach you I'd have shut him up long ago."

"It didn't come from him," she cried, hot with indignation. "He's a gentleman. It's that cat, Mrs. Champlain."

He shrugged his shoulders the slightest bit, but it was eloquent, and she noted it. "Oh, I don't mean that he did it intentionally—he's too decent a chap for that—but anybody's tongue will wag to a beautiful girl! My lady Malotte is a jealous trick."

"Malotte! Who is she?" Helen questioned curiously.

He seemed surprised. "I thought every one knew who she is. It's just as well that you don't."

"I am sure Mr. Glenister would not talk of me. There was a pause."

"Who is Miss Malotte?"

"He studied for a moment, while she watched him. What a splendid figure he made in his evening clothes! The cozy room with its shaded lights enhanced his size and strength and rugged outlines. In his eyes was that admiration which women live for. He lifted his bold, handsome face and met her gaze."

"I had rather leave that for you to find out, for I'm not much of a scandal. I have something more important to tell you. It's the most important thing I have ever said to you, Helen. It was the first time he had used that name, and she began to tremble, while her eyes sought the door in a panic. She had expected this moment, and yet was not ready."

"Not tonight. Don't say it now," she managed to articulate.

"Yes, this is a good time. If you can't answer, I'll come back tomorrow. I want you to be my wife. I want to give you everything the world offers, and I want to make you happy, girl. There'll be no gossip hereafter—I'll shield you from everything unpleasant, and if there is anything you want in life, I'll lay it at your feet. I can do it." He lifted his massive arm, and in the set of his strong square face was the promise that she should have whatever she craved if mortal man could give it to her—love, protection, position, adoration.

She stammered uncertainly till the humiliation and chagrin she had suffered this night swept over her again. This town, this crude, half-born mining camp—had turned against her, misjudged her utterly. The women were envious, checking scandal mongers, all of them, who would ostracize her and make her life in the northland a misery, make her an outcast with nothing to sustain her but her own solitary pride. She could picture her future clearly, pitilessly, and see herself standing alone, vilified, harassed

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thousand cutting ways, yet unable to run away or to explain. She would have to stay and face it, for her life was bound up here during the next few years or so, or as long as her uncle remained a judge. This man would free her. He loved her; he offered her everything. He was bigger than the rest combined. They were his plans, and they knew it. She was sure that she loved him, but his medium was overpowering and her admiration intense. No other man had ever known compared with her except Glenister. But! The beast! He had insulted her at first; he wronged her now.

"Will you be my wife, Helen?" the man repeated softly.

She dropped her head, and he strove forward to take her in his arms, but stopped listening. Some one ran up the porch and hammered loudly at the door. McNamara scowled, walked into the hall and flung the portal open, disclosing Struve.

"Hello, McNamara! Been looking all over for you. There's the deuce to

that. "There will be bloodshed."

"That's just what I must go," said McNamara. "I'll come back in the morning, though, and I'd like to see you alone. Good night!" There was a strange, new light in his eyes as he left her. For one unversed in woman's ways he played the game surprisingly well and as he hurried toward his office he smiled grimly into the darkness.

"She'll answer me tomorrow. Thank you, Mr. Glenister," he said to himself.

Helen questioned Struve at length, but gained nothing more than that secret service men had been at work for weeks and had today unearthed the fact that vigilantes had been formed. They had heard enough to make them think the mines would be jumped again tonight and so had given the alarm.

"Have you hired spies?" she asked incredulously.

"Sure. We had to. The other people shadowed us, and it's come to a point where it's life or death to one side or the other. I told McNamara we'd be bloodshed before we were through, when he first outlined the scheme—I mean when the trouble began."

She wrung her hands. "That's what Uncle feared before we left Seattle. That's why I took the risks I did in bringing you those papers. I thought you got them in time to avoid all this."

Struve laughed a bit, eying her curiously.

"Does Uncle Arthur know about this?" she continued.

"No; we don't let him know anything more than necessary. He's not a strong man."

"Yes, yes. He's not well." Again the lawyer smiled. "Who is behind this vigilante movement?"

"We think it is Glenister and his New Mexican bandit partner. At least they got the crowd together." She was silent for a time.

"I suppose they really think they own these mines."

"Undoubtedly."

"But they don't do they?" Somehow this question had returned to her insistently of late, for things were constantly happening which showed there was more back of this great, fierce struggle than she knew. It was impossible that injustice had been done the mine owners, and yet scattered talk reached her which was puzzling. When she strove to follow it up, her acquaintances adroitly changed the subject. She was baffled on every side. The three local newspapers upheld the court. She read them carefully and was more at sea than ever. There was a disturbing undercurrent of alarm and unrest that caused her to feel insecure, as though standing on hollow ground.

"Yes, this whole disturbance is caused by those two. Only for them we'd be all right."

"Who is Miss Malotte?"

He answered promptly. "The handsomest woman in the north and the most dangerous."

"In what way? Who is she?"

"It's hard to say who or what she is. She's different from other women. She came to Dawson in the early days—just came—we didn't know how, whence or why, and we never found out. We woke up one morning, and

there she was. By night we were all jealous, and in a week we were most of us driving idiots. It might have been the mystery or perhaps the competition. That was the day when a dance hall girl could make a home stake in a winter or marry a millionaire in a month, but she never bothered. She toiled not, neither did she spin on the waxed floors, yet Solomon in all his glory would have looked like a tramp beside her."

"You say she is dangerous?"

"Well, there was a young nobleman, in the winter of '98, Dane, I think—fine family and all that—big yellow haired boy. He wanted to marry her, but a rare dealer shot him. Then there was Rock of the mounted police, the finest officer in the service. He was cashed. She knew he was going to pot for her, but she didn't seem to care—and here were others. Yet, with it all, she is the most generous person and the most tender hearted. Why, she has fed every 'stew bum' on the Yukon, and there isn't a busted prospector in the country who wouldn't swear by her, for she has grubstaked dozens of them. I was horribly in love with her myself. Yes, she's dangerous all right—to everybody but Glenister."

"What do you mean?"

"She's been across the Yukon to nurse a man with scurvy, and coming back she was caught in the spring breakup. I wasn't there, but it seems this Glenister got her ashore somehow when nobody else would tackle the job. They were carried five miles downstream in the ice pack before he succeeded."

"What happened then?"

"She fell in love with him, of course."

"And he worshipped her as madly as all the rest of you, I suppose," she said scornfully.

"That's the peculiar part. She hypnotized him at first, but he ran away, and I didn't hear of him again till I came to Nome. She followed him finally and last week evened up her score. She paid him back for saving her."

"I haven't heard about it."

He detailed the story of the gambling episode, at the Northern saloon and concluded: "I'd like to have seen that turn, for they say the excitement was terrific. She was keeping cases and at the finish slammed her case keeper shut and declared the bet off because she had made a mistake. Of course they couldn't dispute her, and she stuck to it. One of the bystanders told me she lied, though."

"So, in addition to his other vices, Mr. Glenister is a reckless gambler, is he?" said Helen with heat. "I am proud to be indebted to such a character. Truly this country breeds wonderful species."

"There's where you're wrong," Struve chuckled. "He's never been known to bet before."

"Oh, I'm tired of these contradictions," she cried angrily. "Salacious, gambling, halls, scandals, adventures! Oh! I hate it! I hate it! Why did I ever come here?"

"Those things are a part of every new town," Struve answered. "You had on this year. But it is women like you that we fellows need, Miss Helen. You can help us a lot." She did not like the way he was looking at

her and remembered that her uncle was upstairs and asleep.

"I must ask you to excuse me now, for it's late and I am very tired."

The clock showed half past 12, so, after letting him out, she extinguished the light and dragged herself wearily up to her room. She removed her outer garments